American commissioned into the Revenue Cutter Service on March 4, 1865, and by July 1870 had been promoted to First Lieutenant.

Healy’s career took him as far from his Macon, GA roots as one could imagine. He distinguished himself on several polar expeditions, first as a Lieutenant aboard the cutter Rush, later in 1877 as Commander aboard the Revenue Cutter Chandler, charged with the enforcement of sealing restrictions in the Bering Sea. He is the first African American to command a U.S. government vessel. In addition to his command, Healy served as deputy U.S. Marshall in Alaska for several years. Healy’s reputation as a hard-nosed, very demanding Captain who tolerated nothing but the very best from his crew and punished them severely when they produced anything less earned him the nickname “Hell-Raising Healy.” That, combined with a propensity for drinking later in his career landed him in two separate court martial trials.

For Healy’s commitment to the Revenue Cutter Service and his service to the people of Alaska, the U.S. Coast Guard has named its newest polar-class icebreaker in his honor.

The early history of the United States Lighthouse Service is sketchy and full of apocryphal stories. The role, therefore of African-Americans in that story is even more difficult to establish. In 1718 the keeper of the Boston Light perished with his slave in a storm, and 1835 legislation prevented African-Americans from serving aboard lightships in any capacity apart from cooks.

The United States Lifesaving Service often relied on native populations to patrol coastlines. Experienced fishermen, regardless of race, living on the coast lines from Maine to North Carolina provided a steady labor force for the Service. Qualified men needed only medical clearance to be issued Articles of Engagement and become paid lifesavers. In December of 1876 10 Shinnecock Indians on Long Island’s south shore died in a salvage operation of the Circassian. The nearby Tiana Station was staffed for many years from the late 19th to early 20th century by an all African American crew.

From the time of the appointment of Richard Etheridge as Keeper in 1880 until its closure in 1947, the crew at the Pea Island Station in North Carolina was all African-American. Despite
significant local opposition to his appointment including a desertion by white surfmen who refused to serve under a black man's command and a mysterious fire which burned the original Pea Island Station to the ground, Superintendent Kimball stood by his appointment of Etheridge. In fear of stirring more controversy and hatred in the community, no investigation was ever made into the causes of the fire. Etheridge and his crew lived and worked from the station stable while the new station was being built. Notable among their many accomplishments was the safe rescue of the entire crew of the E.S. Newman in October of 1896. Unable to reach the stranded ship by surfboat, Etheridge ordered two of his crewmen into the water, led by surfman Meekins, with ropes tied around their bodies. They were to swim the line out to the distressed vessel and begin the rescue. After six hours all hands, including the Captain, his wife and their three year old son were safely rescued.

The Pea Island crew quickly developed a reputation for bravery and commitment to duty, even in the most perilous conditions. Despite the prevailing attitudes towards African-Americans at the time, they were considered among the best, if not the best lifesaving crew in the service.

On February 29, 1992 the U.S. Coast Guard Cutter Pea Island was commissioned at Norfolk, Virginia in memory of the all African-American crews at the Pea Island Station, including Richard Etheridge.

Despite the service and heroism of African-Americans in its predecessor agencies, it was April 1942, with the nation on the brink of war when President Franklin D. Roosevelt made clear that African-Americans would be fully integrated into the Coast Guard. African-American sailors would now be accepted into service in positions other than messmen. That spring one hundred and fifty volunteer recruits arrived at the Manhattan Beach Training Station in New York. Those who qualified after four weeks’ basic training went on to become radio operators, pharmacists, electricians and coxswains. Though training was fully integrated, mess and bunk facilities remained segregated. In 1944 Ensign Harvey Russell becomes the first African-American graduate of the Coast Guard’s Officer Candidate School, and in 1966 Merle Smith is the first African-American graduated from the U.S. Coast Guard Academy in New London.

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